

Durham Research Online

Deposited in DRO:

16 April 2020

Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Carlsen, A. and Pitsis, T. S. (2020) 'We are projects : narrative capital and meaning making in projects.', *Project management journal*, 51 (4). pp. 357-366.

Further information on publisher's website:

<https://doi.org/10.1177/8756972820929479>

Publisher's copyright statement:

Carlsen, A. Pitsis, T. S. (2020). We are projects: Narrative capital and meaning making in projects. *Project Management Journal* 51(4): 357-366. Copyright © 2020 The Author(s) DOI: 10.1177/8756972820929479

Additional information:

Use policy

The full-text may be used and/or reproduced, and given to third parties in any format or medium, without prior permission or charge, for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes provided that:

- a full bibliographic reference is made to the original source
- a [link](#) is made to the metadata record in DRO
- the full-text is not changed in any way

The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

Please consult the [full DRO policy](#) for further details.

We Are Projects: Narrative Capital and Meaning Making in Projects

Arne Carlsen - BI Norway - arne.carlsen@bi.no

Tyrone S. Pitsis - Durham University Business School –
tyrone.s.pitsis@durham.ac.uk

Abstract

Research on projects has to a limited degree taken issue with how projects are chief producers of meaning at work. We develop the concept of *narrative capital* as a basic mechanism for how people can engender meaning in and through projects in organizations. Narrative capital is derived from experiences that people appropriate into their individual and collective life stories, retrospectively as adding to a repertoire of accumulated learning and mastering, and prospectively in terms of living with purpose and hope. We chart implications for meaning making in project as expanding ownership, expanding connections of impact and extending narrative possibility.

Key words: Projects, narrative capital, meaning making, identity, imagination

“The first two years, seriously, I hoped for a small heart attack so I could say that I had to quit” (interview with Headmaster leading a school transformation project)

(Carlsen & Pitsis, 2009a, p. 78)¹

In his classic article “From meaning to method”, Max van Manen (1997, p. 345) inspires us to pay attention to the textual meaning of those we seek to study because a “...good phenomenological text has the effect of making us suddenly ‘see’ something in a manner that enriches our understanding of everyday life experiences.” In the simple quote from the school Headmaster above, one may glean a multitude of insights about life in projects; of a person’s commitment to that project to the point where the only way out at times seems through a heart attack. In that one sentence one can imagine and empathize with the stress and challenges this leader endured as he tried to transform the school from a run-

¹ When revisiting this example throughout the article we build on the paper by Carlsen and Pitsis (2009a) as well as our continued research on the same organization by the first author. This has involved a series of interviews and talks with the Headmaster, as well as engaging in repeated site visits at the school and informal conversations with teachers and students over the last 10 years. We do so in a strictly illustrative manner.

down hopeless place struggling to attract any students at all, into the leading school of its kind in the country (Carlsen & Pitsis, 2009a). In project management research and practice we have all too often allowed method to preclude meaning (Cicmil, 2006), to the point that we no longer hear or even listen to the voices and experiences of those living, breathing and kindling life into those projects. Losing meaning, whether in research or life, means losing out on what makes projects powerful.

This paper sets out to develop the concept of *narrative capital* as a basic mechanism for how people can engender meaning in and through projects at work. Projects are increasingly acknowledged as vehicles for how people get things done in organizations (Geraldi & Söderlund, 2018; Lundin et al., 2015), whether that means delivering services, creating and producing things, or facilitating change and innovation (Davies, Manning, & Söderlund, 2018). Projects as a particular form of temporary team-based work practice are, however, largely unrecognized as chief producers of meaning in organizations (Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010). Typically, research suggests that work practices may facilitate multiple sources of meaning in organizations. This may include a sense of calling (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009), the intrinsic joy of doing things well (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999) or the ability to do well *for* others (Bolino & Grant, 2016), and *with* others (Colbert, Bono, & Purvanova, 2016). All of these sources of meaning are in principle relevant also for projects as a specific form of organizational practice. But our focus as to the reason why projects may be meaning maker “numero uno” in organizations lies elsewhere.

In this essay, we focus on projects as conduits to creating and sustaining meaningfulness at work. We advocate for more understanding of the inherent meaning making potentials in projects: Projects can serve a fundamental function of creating progression in the experiencing of work-related identities (Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010) that can be seen as ongoing life stories. This is so because projects play a major role in

structuring the spatio-temporal experience at work, and people create, alter or sustain their identities through practices that are organized as projects. Projects, in short, are naturally storied units of experiencing that play vital roles in how people enrich their lives through remembering past experiences and imagining the new. To give this flesh, we develop the concept of *narrative capital* (Carlsen & Pitsis, 2009b; Scheibe, 2000), to explore how people engender meaning in and from projects as being related to their sense of self. With narrative capital we understand the appropriating of some desirable time-bound experiences into individual and organizational life stories, either as projects passed or those orienting what people hope for when living life forward. Appropriating involves both backwards looking reflection and forward-looking imagination. Narrative capital is thus comprised of storied units of meaning that are important both in the sense of retrospectively building a repertoire of competence enhancing experiences and sustaining positive legacies, and in terms of prospectively generating new possibilities for development and growth. Thus, we see narrative capital as closely tied to projects as a temporal phenomenon in realizing possibilities (following Schutz, 1967; Schutz & Wagner, 1970) and enriching people's lives. While it has a social dimension, it is more concerned with the temporalities of remembering and anticipating in meaning making than in the ongoing production of relationships.² While we do follow some related concepts of capital in emphasizing the positive connotations of accumulation of something of social value, we also towards the end open up for a problematizing of the more precarious and potentially negative sides of narrative capital

² It is beyond the scope of this essay to provide a complete inventory of how narrative capital relates to related constructs of psychological capital, social capital and cultural capital, but we would like to make a few remarks. First, psychological capital (PsyCap) (Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017) has typically been explored as an individual-level construct and while it has recently been developed as a collective phenomenon (Dawkins, et. al, 2015) it does not incorporate either consideration of meaning making or identity from a temporal perspective of experience (Carlsen et. al, 2012). Cultural capital carries a treatment of temporal tensions of how people's capacities to project forward are conditioned by their prior socio-cultural habitus, but this is a concept that is more directed at understanding social differentiation (Bourdieu, 1986; Robbins, 2005) than identity-related growth through meaning making. Finally, social capital is roughly understood as the goodwill (Adler & Kwon, 2002) and resources that inhere and flow in networks of social relationships (Baker & Dutton, 2007).

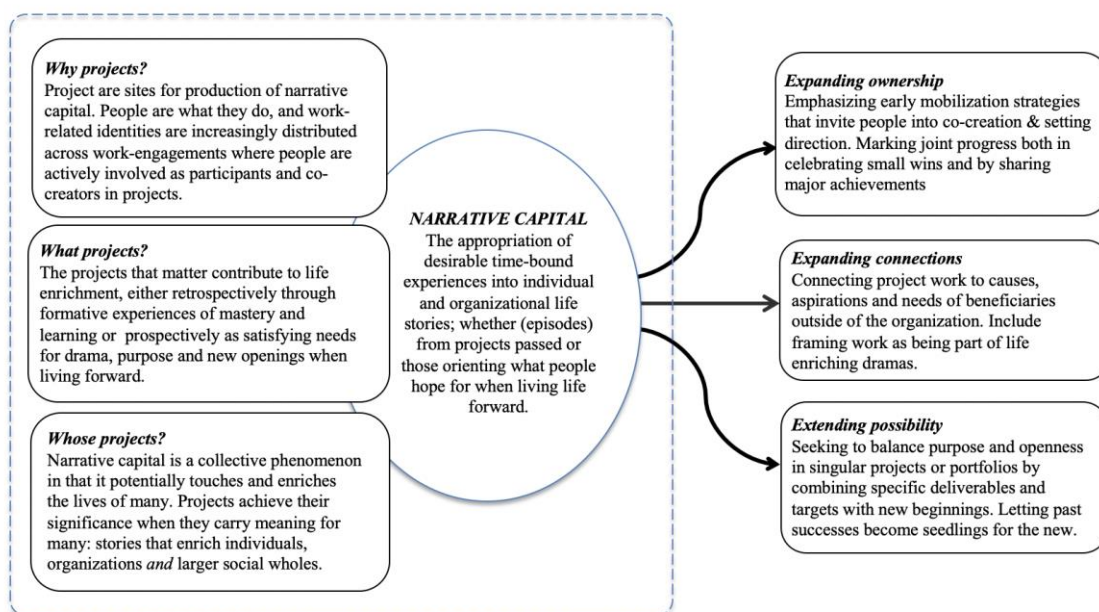
We tie the concept of narrative capital to the framing and delivery of projects. Doing so we unabashedly privilege the actors, and human experience, to explore how particular forms of meaning making may both produce positive identities in the workplace and positively influence project success. We begin with two core assumptions that: 1) at the organizational level projects are the fundamental tool used in organizations to realize strategy and to get things done; and 2) at the individual level our projects are the conduit to self-development and meaning making. We make no causal claims that meaning making always underpins performance, or that projects are reducible to narrative capital. Rather, we are exploring how as the title of our essay suggests, people in a basic way are the culmination of their projects, thus need projects for life enrichment, and how this implicates potentials for meaning making. We are projects in terms of where we belong; more so, we are projects in what we become (Carlsen, 2009).

In a philosophical sense, our ideas of projects correspond to the pragmatism of William James and John Dewey, in particular as interpreted by Thomas Alexander's (Alexander, 2013) idea of *The Human Eros*. In its most basic interpretation, *The Human Eros* denotes our search for meaning; meaning fundamentally steeped in a qualitative engagement with the world we live in. Meanings can be found in the artefacts of our human existence; in our successes and our failures, and in our daily practice. Projects, in short, serve vital functions of remembering, attending and projecting in this ongoing meaning making. Meaning so conceived is a form of imagination that is "an operation in the present, establishing continuity with the past and anticipating the future" (Alexander, 1993, p. 387). Now, while Alexander refers more to a pragmatic imagination, consistent with Deweyan philosophy, we see projects as the material, naturalistic and humanistic acts through which imagination becomes a quest for meaning. People need projects to produce meaning, not just for the individual but to fulfill

societal missions more broadly, be it a moon landing, restoring a run-down school or a caring for a small community garden in a poor area of the city.

We offer a theorizing of projects as potential generators of narrative capital, conceived through six sections. In the first three of these sections, we lay the theoretical groundwork, mainly drawing on narrative psychology, pragmatism and narrative identity theory as applied to organizations and projects. In the last three sections, we discuss implications for research and practice: What new research questions are implied by a theory of projects as generators of narrative capital, and how might project managers act on these insights? Figure 1 below provides an overview of the theoretical argument and some of its implications.

Figure 1 The concept of narrative capital in projects: Underpinnings and implications



Why projects? Tell me about your projects and I'll tell you who you are

The idea that people are their projects can be traced back to at least two sets of sources. One is the notion of a distributed self, originating from the work of Jerome Bruner (Bruner, 1990, pp. 106-107; see also Little, 1993), who suggested seeing identity less as a nuclear core and more as a “swarm of participations” distributed over a range of contexts and engagements

whereby people meet social expectations and acknowledgement as participants. Conceived as such, peoples' identities are to no small degree a function of the social worlds they are engaged in, and projects may form the nuclei of these social worlds. Thus, selves are distributed over projects as *discourses* where meaning is negotiated between protagonists and stakeholders in the outside world (including external project participants and beneficiaries).

Selves are also distributed in projects as social *practices* (Bruner, 1990, p, 116-118) whereby people are actively involved in various undertakings as participants and co-creators. People's identities are not mere psycho-social constructions hovering above the ground of social practice (Dreier, 1999). Rather, identities are achieved in social action and unfold along trajectories of social practice (Carlsen, 2009; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998) and the particulars of value creating activities that people are engaged in at work. Such value creating activities may have strands of professional identity (Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006) that differ substantially among types of projects, such as research projects versus consulting projects (Empson, 2013), or product development projects versus systems deliverables (Carlsen, 2006). In project-based organizations, projects are at the center of practice, the "embodied, materially [and symbolically] mediated arrays of human activity" (Schatzki, 2001, p. 2). Thus, when we say that people are what they do (Carlsen, 2009; Holland et al, 1998), we could also say that we are our projects. For the Headmaster in the opening sequence example, this indeed seemed the case. The rest of his professional life took place at the school, and the transformation and further development of the school in many ways became a life-long personal project pursuit (Little, Salmela-Aro, & Phillips, 2017) that formed his professional and personal identity (Carlsen & Pitsis, 2009a). But all this in itself is only part of the story.

What projects? Mundane projects and projects for life

Projects of course differ widely in objectives, rhythm, division of labor, participation within and across organizations, time length and magnitude – whether economically, with regards to what is at stake, and for whom. Very few projects that people engage in at work are life enriching in ways that leave lasting influences on their sense of self. Which projects then matter the most, or more precisely, *how* are projects *made* to matter and produce narrative capital?

Some projects are from the start set up to pursue a calling and first of all fulfill deeply held personal and professional passions (Svejenova, Strandgaard Pedersen, & Vives, 2011), or megaprojects that represent iconic monuments of economic, aesthetic, political and technological significance (Flyvbjerg, 2014; Pitsis et. al. 2003). Between the range of pre-charged projects and the more mundane and routine undertakings, lie a vast territory of opportunity for meaning making. We suggest that projects matter because, and when, they can produce meaning making as life enrichment, either through retelling and remembering stories of what was, or through projecting stories of what could be. Narrative psychology and narrative identity theory postulate that narratives are basic cultural forms that render sequences of human experiences and intentions meaningful through time (Bruner, 1990; MacIntyre, 1981; Mitchell, 1981; Sarbin, 1986). People experience their lives through evolving life stories that they continuously construct and reconstruct to make sense of their past and anticipate their future (Bruner, 1990; Crites, 1971; McAdams, 1993, 2001). In a retrospective sense, projects may contribute to narrative capital because they produce formative experiences in peoples' lives that can contribute to legacies (Bednar, 2013), build self-efficacy (Bandura, 2000) and leave something behind for future generations (McAdams & Guo, 2015). This is the meaning of narrative capital that is the closest to the work of Karl Scheibe (Scheibe, 1986, 2000), who used the term to denote the value of chapters added to

individual life stories. To Scheibe, narrative capital results from embarking upon time-bound and goal directed adventures where challenges are met, and risks are handled:

The value of such action is that the consequences of having enjoyed such thrilling experiences flow beyond the bounds of the occasion. One tells stories about these events, “dines out on them”, elaborates and embroiders on successive retellings. In this fashion, the life story of the participant is enriched (Scheibe, 1986, p. 136)

It is inherent in these statements, though less articulated, that projects may also produce stories that are lived-in narratives. People not only use stories to make sense of their past or celebrate their accomplishments but grab plot-lines that inform what they attend to, enact and deem important when living life forward (Bruner, 1990; Ricoeur, 1991). This dimension of narrative capital has been further emphasized and developed by Carlsen and Pitsis (2009b), who underlined the projective element of life enrichment associated with moving horizons of expectation and hope in the stories of what could be. From such a projective perspective, narrative capital may also be associated with unpredictability and risk as valuable in itself (Kvalnes, 2016), because projects are arenas where people satisfy fundamental needs of experiencing drama (Carlsen, 2008) and purpose (Pitsis, et. al., 2003). Narrative capital engenders a form of possibility thinking that in itself is the foundation of creative thought, involving “the posing, in multiple ways, of the question ‘What if?’” (Craft, Cremin, Burnard, & Chappell, 2007, p. 2). In short, we are the stories of the projects we remember because they made a difference for ourselves and others, and those that we anticipate because they provide hope when living forward.

Whose projects? One, No-one and One Hundred Thousand

So far in this article, we have described narrative capital as something that may be taken to belong primarily to individuals. Let us broaden it. *One, No-one and One Hundred Thousand* was the title of the famous novel by Nobel Laureate Luigi Pirandello (Pirandello, 1926/1992) – a philosophical chronicle of identity and madness that was much ahead of its

time. The protagonist in the novel starts a frantic search for his true self (to the point of trying to grasp an image of his true self in the mirror while his conscious self is not watching, or being jealous of the version of himself that his wife is in love with) and realizes that he is simultaneously one, no-one, and a multitude. Then nothing matters. By parallel, while narrative capital can be experienced as deeply personal, it contracts into nothingness when tied exclusively to one person – when it is not shared. Narrative capital is a collective phenomenon not just because it is produced in collective practices and negotiated with the collective language resources of a multitude of stakeholders, but also because it potentially touches and enriches the lives of many. The transformation of the high school that we have referred to would hardly be of much consequence if considered the sole adventure of the Headmaster. Rather, the project gains its force precisely because it engages a broad array of stakeholders, not just other teachers, or students and their caretakers, but also those having a stake in developing a socioeconomically disadvantaged part of the city (Carlsen & Pitsis, 2009a) or exploring new avenues of how the high school can fulfill broader societal missions, such as for example handling immigration well.

More principally, it is misguided to equate narrative capital with individual identity alone. Self-stories proceed from mind to culture as well as from culture to mind (Bruner, 1990, p. 108). Experiences from projects have multiple addressees and gain their momentum for that very reason. Project identities evolve alongside identities of organizations or individuals (Lundin et al., 2015, p. 106). Thus, projects may be sites for authoring stories of individuals within stories of organizations within stories of larger social wholes and struggles (Holland & Lave, 2001; Mills, 1959/2000), and self is always located in a social world (Berger, 1966). Winning a medal at the Olympics or a turning around a high school are types of experiences that are likely to be attributed to the protagonist individuals involved and may leave lasting imprints in their life stories. Such experiences may also be attributed to a team

(e.g. cycling team, team of teachers), an organization (e.g. a cycling association, the school as a whole), an industry or a city, a tradition (of training or pedagogy), or even a nation. Thus, narrative capital, much like projects, resists a clear separation between individual and collective levels of analysis. Recognizing the collective dimension of narrative capital of course also complicates matters.

One cannot assume that the meanings that people derive from projects are uniform across stakeholders. Indeed, megaprojects, like getting ready for the Olympics (Pitsis et al., 2003) or building a high speed train (Van Marrewijk, 2017) are often charged with politics (Flyvbjerg, 2014) that are partly due to variation of local interpretation – a symbolic multivocality (Van Marrewijk, 2017) that both adds to the potentials and complexities of meaning making.

In summary, our first three sections have emphasized a focus on the narrative of *why* projects, *what* projects, and a collective sense of *whose* projects. We have established that projects are sites for production of narrative capital through life enrichment, that the projects that are likely to matter the most satisfy fundamental needs for mastery, drama, purpose and hope, and that narrative capital is a collective phenomenon that gains its significance from touching and enriching the lives of many. What are the theoretical and practical implications of this set of conceptions? How can one ensure that narrative capital of projects is sustained, shared and owned by many in a way that is also productive for project execution? The three remaining sections address these questions.

Expanding ownership: Yours and our projects

The American-South African biographical sports drama film *Invictus* tells the story of how the new South-African nation under the leadership of Nelson Mandela experienced a moment of national transformation when the national team Springboks won the 1995 Rugby

World Cup. Based on John Carlin's book *Playing the Enemy: Nelson Mandela and the Game That Made a Nation*, it tells the story of how the Springboks team was not expected to perform well at the competition having just returned to high-level international competition following the dismantling of apartheid. Springboks were perceived as a redneck team that to many blacks represented prejudice and apartheid. In the movie there is a powerful scene of the first major meeting between Mandela and the captain of the Springboks, François Pienaar. The meeting is in many ways a showcase of leadership through building high-quality connections (Stephens, Heaphy, & Dutton, 2012) and has at its core a set of open-ended questions: "So tell me François, what is your philosophy of leadership? How do you inspire your men to be better than they think they can be?" The meeting works as an invitation to join forces and make the Rugby World Cup a shared project, one that can build bridges, unite people and inspire the nation. It succeeds; the project in many ways produced narrative capital for the larger project of reimagining the young nation (Farquharson & Marjoribanks, 2003).

This example and the previous three sections raise questions about the relationship between narrative capital and psychological ownership (Pierce, Kostova, & Dirks, 2001) of projects and how such ownership is created. Previous research has suggested that attention to early comprehensive mobilization strategies is important to get projects right from the start, in terms of team formation and subsequent performance (Erickson & Dyer, 2004). Likewise, other research has suggested that project managers should focus more on ramping up their project team and "getting fat fast" in the early phases, rather than on containing project costs (Van Oorschot, Sengupta, Akkermans, & Van Wassenhove, 2010). Future research may ask whether and how the early phase mobilization and team building of projects can be key to not just immediate performance, but also may have longer term positive effect in meaning making through building a specific form of ownership (Dawkins, Tian, Newman, & Martin, 2017) tied to and in narrative capital.

Recent research on episodes of deep help in complex projects (Fisher, Pillemer, & Amabile, 2018) indicates that actually accomplishing something may sometimes be subordinate to ownership. In one of the examples in the paper, the client of a design firm has been somewhat unhappy with early drafts. The project leader, Carole, asks a colleague outside the project, Richard, for feedback on a pitch to the client. The help comes in the form of a takeover: “After listening to the team’s pitch, Richard returned to the project space with Carole and reworked it himself. He then took over the client presentation. The project was quite successful, but Carole viewed the episode as among the most negative in her career.” (Fisher et al., 2018, p. 1532). We see this as speaking to how distorted ownership may diminish narrative capital; Carole makes a negative attribution from the project to her own professional life story.

Another set of questions concerns how narrative capital can be built by fostering ownership retrospectively. Research on creative work has pointed to the importance of marking progress, such as small wins, to boost motivation and performance (Amabile & Kramer, 2011) in subsequent innovation efforts. Facilitating the sharing of progress or success may have similar functions in building collective self-efficacy (Bandura, 2000), fostering coactive vicarious learning (Myers, 2014) as well as providing narrative capital for both individuals and the collective. In any newspaper interview or presentation about the turnaround process, the Headmaster of the high school would emphasize the story as a joint undertaking, and one that mattered for the city neighborhood. Moreover, he would typically put students in the center and emphasize examples of their growth and participation in building the school. Time and effort on expanding a sense of psychological ownership is crucial for building narrative capital, which in turn gives way to expanding connection.

Expanding connection: Projects for the other

Narrative capital stretches beyond the project as a time-bound event and beyond the organization. This implies that it is important to pay careful attention to and accentuate the ways that projects are made for others. The basic implication here is one of expanding connection by linking to stories unfolding outside the organizations. Projects that are made to matter do so because someone manage to demonstrate how they form part of extra-organizational development trajectories, be they disciplinary traditions, mythical structures, city development or other larger social wholes (Carlsen & Pitsis, 2009b). Recent research suggest that making such connections are integral to work on ideas in complex projects, in effect part of what makes ideas matter in a field of ideas, whether a genre of film-making or regional geology (Coldevin, Carlsen, Clegg, Pitsis, & Antonacopoulou, 2019).

A particularly vivid case of expanding connection can be found in a recent paper on President Kennedy's leadership of NASA in the 1960s (Carton, 2018). Kennedy used five strategies for sense-giving, each of which helped employees see a stronger connection between their work and NASA's ultimate aspirations, for example through making distant aspirations more proximal, building steppingstones towards grand aspirations and linking these further to personal contributions of employees. When such connections were the strongest, employees construed their day-to-day activities not as short-term tasks ("I'm mopping the floor" or "I'm building electrical circuits") but as part of the pursuit of larger objectives ("I'm putting a man on the moon" or "I am advancing science").

Not all projects can be connected to the equivalence of moon landings. One larger lessons here is tied to motivational frames for action (Benford & Snow, 2000) that help people place their projects within larger stories where something vital is at stake, something that charges work with meaning. Examples include framing one's work – whether in a high school, an IT consulting firm, oil exploration, fishing, or communication work – as being part

of life enriching missions, battles, mysteries, treasure hunts or cathedral building (Carlsen, 2008). Underpinning such motivational frames is the ongoing asking of a set of foundational questions: What is really at stake when venturing forth? What kind of life enriching adventure is this project part of, and how could that matter to us in the everyday?

All this said, it cannot be assumed that any form of expansive connecting or motivational framing may be beneficial for actors' lives or their performance. A failure to connect everyday work to high aspirations may make people dispirited or alienated with perceptions of insurmountable aspiration gaps, and making such connections are far from trivial (Carton, 2018), as Flyvbjerg's (2014) work on megaprojects suggests. Motivational frames may seem aggrandized or removed from people's understanding of their work activities (Carlsen, 2006), even mere fabrications (Goffman 1967, Ch. 4 & 10). Higher purposes need to be perceived as authentic (Quinn & Thakor, 2018) and have grounding in actual practice.

Tied to such controversies of motivational frames, we might also find a greater emphasis on the notion of project management practice, be it extraordinary or mundane, as a true craft. Richard Sennett's ideas of *The Craftsmen* fit such a narrative where love and care for one's craft is reinforced in both how the profession is developed and also practiced (Sennett, 2008). Again, such a framing of one's work cannot be taken for granted. A travel through Sennett's classic book provides several stories of how a quest for profit maximization, undergirded by disenchanting performance indicators, disengages those who perform on projects from their *experiences* of performing. Plying one's craft with love and care is an ultimate show of respect to oneself and care for end-users (Taylor, Ladkin, & Statler, 2014). There is much research indicating that the framing and connecting that matter the most are the ones that establishes how one makes a difference to the human other, whether immediate or more distant beneficiaries (Bolino & Grant, 2018). There is a rich tradition of

research on the psychosocial construction of generativity, usually defined as adults' concern for and commitment to promoting the well-being of future generations (McAdams, Diamond, de St Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997; McAdams & Guo, 2015). This is paralleled by growing research on prosocial behavior and the importance of prosocial motivation (Grant & Berry, 2011), as a major strand of individual engagement and identity formation (Bolino & Grant, 2016). This suggests further exploration of how project managers can activate motivation of a prosocial nature to simultaneously build narrative capital and boost performance.

For the Headmaster of the high school, the authenticity of the motivational framing of the transformation project was helped by at least three sets of processes. First, his colleagues described him as repeatedly calling them into battle against competing high schools in more advantaged parts of the city, including constantly marking and celebrating progress in competitive indicators such as drop-out rates and applications. Second, a steady stream of new innovation efforts in pedagogy, school activities and school organizing brought credibility to high aspirations, thus amounting to concrete steppingstones (Carton, 2018) and achievements that connected to higher aspirations. And third, the craft of caring for the singular student as an animating master frame was evident in all parts of school activities. This, for example, took the form of schemes for elaborate social onboarding, investment into varied student social activities, greeting conventions (all staff were expected to personally greet any student they met during the day), conflict negotiations (where the Headmaster would invariably side with students), as well as practices of emphasizing and celebrating student entrepreneurial projects and student revues. As a manager remarked after a presentation by the Headmaster. "He [the Headmaster] is simply so proud of and emotionally moved by the students in all these activities, Then we are moved too." At the heart of the narrative capital were strong perceptions that the transformation project was authentically for the student other.

Extending possibility: Open projects and new beginnings

Narrative capital grow with open rather than closed stories. Around 10 years after our Headmaster entertained the idea of leaving the hopeless school with a heart attack, the school emerged as the uncontested winner of the annual competition for student applications (an outcome that is critical for allocation of public resources), and also shattered the national record for applications. Upon learning of this, the Headmaster recognized a dilemma of having attained a major goal: 'It's a bit like Bob Beamon having made that jump [1968 long jump Olympics in Mexico, a record that would stand for four decades], walking back and forth, staring at the pitch in disbelief, knowing he would never surpass it –what's next?' (Carlsen & Pitsis, 2009a, p. 92). We understand this statement to mean that the Headmaster realized that the battle against rival high schools and the hopes for goal-attainment were about to lose their life enriching functions. In the wake of temporary emptying attainment-hope, a search for sustaining the narrative capital of the school transformation project necessitated the extending of possibilities.

By extending possibility to sustain narrative capital, we mean two sets of things. One is the notion of opening up. Alongside the need for living with purpose and hope for goal attainment, is an at least equally strong need for indeterminacy and openness in people's lives (Carlsen & Pitsis, 2009a; McAdams, 1993), including a belief that the future is open-ended, fraught with generative possibilities and can be influenced (Ludema, Wilmot, & Srivastva, 1997). Striving for goal-attainment in itself can be trapping. From a perspective of meaning making, this suggests attention to balancing purpose and openness in singular projects or in a portfolio of projects. Other things being equal, this favors organizations that can engage their employees in a varied set of projects; some set on very specific purposes and deliverables, others representing the glory of the clean sheets and new beginnings.

Extending possibility may also mean a process by which one seeks to replicate some aspect of past successful experience and follow up on the trajectories for development that are opened up or can be inferred from these experiences. This may involve instantiating experiences from past projects as desired exemplars of what could be (Carlsen, 2006). Or we may think along the lines of experiential surfacing (Nilsson, 2015) of episodes from projects that involve particularly notable or desirable experiences for beneficiaries. In this way, sustaining narrative capital involves telling stories of prior innovation projects so that they work as a generative memory for the next adventures (Garud, Dunbar, & Bartel, 2011). Extending entails drawing upon the successful past in reflective and creative use of prior experience to meet evolving desires and purposes (Alexander, 2013).

Conclusion

We are projects because selves are distributed across contexts of participating in practices that are increasingly organized as projects and because some such participations enter individual and organizational life stories. We are the projects that enlist our imagination, whether looking back at the stories of what was or the ones that orient our lives in the present of things future. We are the projects that matter not just to ourselves but that touches the lives of many and enter into larger causes and struggles. Because we are our projects, project managers have unique opportunities to facilitate meaning making that can be powerful for people, projects and organizations alike. These mechanisms for meaning making are about building narrative capital and are greatly under-researched in project management literature.

We have charted three sets of practices for building narrative capital, each with further implications for research and practice. One is inviting people into adventure and sharing outcomes so that people feel they are somehow participants or protagonists in the project story/ies and thus gain psychological ownership. Another is to connect the stories of the

project to larger causes and struggles outside of its proximate task-oriented sphere, *and* to the more mundane realities of everyday practice. Such connections, while always questioned for their authenticity and legitimacy, seem particularly important when they involve making a difference for immediate and distant beneficiaries. A third is to continue to keep projects open, balance participation over a portfolio of projects with varied demands of goal-orientation and open-endedness and to lift stories from the projects that mattered so that they can represent a generative repertoire of new beginnings, other projects we can become.

Further research will be needed to deepen and nuance these narrative practices. And while we have emphasized narrative capital as a largely positive phenomenon (that may be untrivial to create) we have merely hinted at its potential negative nature as being either narrowing and trapping (in terms of reflecting stories lacking openness), inauthentic (and thus of little value) or even shaming and a threat to identity: Projects that were once charged with meanings of progress and hope may evolve into being symbols of failure (Van Marrewijk, 2017), and stories of a troubling past may be reiterated to close down possibilities. In this sense, the concept of narrative capital has a clear parallel in research on agency (Cooren, 2018; Välikangas & Carlsen, 2019) as a temporal-relational phenomenon that needs to be explored as ongoing collective *acts* of narration more than reified properties of social affairs. When looking backwards, remembering may or may not be done in such a way that action repertoires from the past are located and mobilized. When looking forwards, imagination of higher ends and new possibilities may or may not be well enough connected to people's challenges in the everyday.

The overall message for project managers nevertheless seems clear: Cultivating narrative capital means first of all to invite conversations about the stories our projects are producing: What is really at stake? What do we want to achieve? Why and how could this

project matter to you, us and others when looking backwards and forwards in time? What's our story now?

References

- Adler, P. S., & Kwon, S.-W. (2002). Social capital: Prospects for a new concept. *Academy of Management Review*, 27(1), 17-40.
- Alexander, T. M. (1993). John Dewey and the moral imagination: Beyond Putnam and Rorty toward a postmodern ethics. *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 29(3), 369-400.
- Alexander, T. M. (2013). *The Human Eros: Eco-ontology and The Aesthetics of Existence*. Cambridge MA: Oxford University Press.
- Amabile, T. M., & Kramer, S. (2011). *The Progress Principle: Using Small Wins to Ignite Joy, Engagement, and Creativity at Work*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Publishing.
- Baker, W., & Dutton, J. E. (2007). Enabling positive social capital in organizations. In J. E. Dutton & B. R. Ragins (Eds.), *Exploring positive relationships at work: Building a theoretical and research foundation* (pp. 325-345). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Bandura, A. (2000). Exercise of human agency through collective efficacy. *Current directions in psychological science*, 9(3), 75-78.
- Bednar, J. (2013). *Legacies in organizations*. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation. Ann Arbor, MI.
- Benford, R. D., & Snow, D. A. (2000). Framing processes and social movements: An overview and assessment. *Annual review of sociology*, 26(1), 611-639.
- Berger, P. (1966). Identity as a problem in the sociology of knowledge. *European Journal of Sociology/Archives Européennes de Sociologie*, 7(1), 105-115.
- Bolino, M. C., & Grant, A. M. (2016). The bright side of being prosocial at work, and the dark side, too: A review and agenda for research on other-oriented motives, behavior, and impact in organizations. *The Academy of Management Annals*, 10(1), 599-670.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. (pp. 241-258). New York, NY: Greenwood.
- Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of Meaning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bunderson, J. S., & Thompson, J. A. (2009). The call of the wild: Zookeepers, callings, and the double-edged sword of deeply meaningful work. *Administrative science quarterly*, 54(1), 32-57.
- Carlsen, A. (2006). Organizational becoming as dialogic imagination of practice: The case of the Indomitable Gauls. *Organization Science*, 17(1), 132-149.
- Carlsen, A. (2008). Positive dramas: Enacting self-adventures in organizations. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 3(1), 55-75.
- Carlsen, A. (2009). After James on identity. In P. Adler (Ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Sociology and Organization Studies: Classical Foundations*. (pp. 421-443). New York, NY: Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Carlsen, A., Hagen, A. L., & Mortensen, T. F. (2012). Imagining hope in organizations: From individual goal-attainment to horizons of relational possibility. In K. Cameron & G. Spreitzer (Eds.), *Handbook of positive organizational scholarship* (pp. 288-303). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Carlsen, A., & Pitsis, T. (2009a). Experiencing hope in organizational lives. In L. M. Roberts & J. E. Dutton (Eds.), *Exploring positive identities and organizations: Building a theoretical and research foundation* (pp. 77-98). New York, NY: Psychology Press.
- Carlsen, A., & Pitsis, T. (2009b). Projects for life: building narrative capital for positive organizational change. In S. R. Clegg & G. L. Cooper (Eds.), *Handbook of Macro Organizational Behavior* (pp. 456-477). London: Sage.
- Carton, A. M. (2018). "I'm Not Mopping the Floors, I'm Putting a Man on the Moon": How NASA Leaders Enhanced the Meaningfulness of Work by Changing the Meaning of Work. *Administrative science quarterly*, 63(2), 323-369.
- Cicmil, S. (2006). Understanding project management practice through interpretative and critical research perspectives. *Project management journal*, 37(2), 27-37.
- Colbert, A. E., Bono, J. E., & Purvanova, R. K. (2016). Flourishing via workplace relationships: Moving beyond instrumental support. *Academy of Management Journal*, 59(4), 1199-1223.
- Coldevin, G. H., Carlsen, A., Clegg, S., Pitsis, T., & Antonacopoulou, E. (2019). Organizational creativity as idea work: Intertextual placing and legitimating imaginings in media development and oil exploration. *Human Relations*, 72(8), 1369-1397. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726718806349>
- Cooren, F. (2018). Acting for, with, and through: A relational perspective on agency in MSF's organizing. In B. H. J. M. Brummans (Ed.), *The Agency of Organizing* (pp. 142-169). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Craft, A., Cremin, T., Burnard, P., & Chappell, K. (2007). Developing creative learning through possibility thinking with children aged 3-7. In A. Craft, T. Cremin, & P. Burnard (Eds.), *Creative Learning 3-11 and How We Document It*. London, UK: Trentham. . London, UK: Trentham.
- Crites, S. (1971). The narrative quality of experience. *Journal of the American academy of religion*, 291-311.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1999). 16 implications of a systems perspective for the study of creativity *Handbook of creativity* (pp. 313-335): Cambridge University Press.
- Davies, A., Manning, S., & Söderlund, J. (2018). When neighboring disciplines fail to learn from each other: The case of innovation and project management research. *Research policy*, 47(5), 965-979.
- Dawkins, S., Martin, A., Scott, J., & Sanderson, K. (2015). Advancing conceptualization and measurement of psychological capital as a collective construct. *Human Relations*, 68(6), 925-949.
- Dawkins, S., Tian, A. W., Newman, A., & Martin, A. (2017). Psychological ownership: A review and research agenda. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 38(2), 163-183.
- Dreier, O. (1999). Personal trajectories of participation across contexts of social practice. *Outlines. Critical practice studies*, 1(1), 5-32.
- Dutton, J. E., Roberts, L. M., & Bednar, J. (2010). Pathways for positive identity construction at work: Four types of positive identity and the building of social resources. *Academy of Management Review*, 35(2), 265-293.
- Empson, L. (2013). My Affair With the "Other" Identity Journeys Across the Research-Practice Divide. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 22(2), 229-248.
- Ericksen, J., & Dyer, L. (2004). Right from the start: Exploring the effects of early team events on subsequent project team development and performance. *Administrative science quarterly*, 49(3), 438-471.
- Farquharson, K., & Marjoribanks, T. (2003). Transforming the Springboks: Re-imagining the South African nation through sport. *Social Dynamics*, 29(1), 27-48.

- Fisher, C. M., Pillemer, J., & Amabile, T. M. (2018). Deep help in complex project work: Guiding and path-clearing across difficult terrain. *Academy of Management Journal*, 61(4), 1524-1553.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2014). What you should know about megaprojects and why: An overview. *Project management journal*, 45(2), 6-19.
- Garud, R., Dunbar, R. L., & Bartel, C. A. (2011). Dealing with unusual experiences: A narrative perspective on organizational learning. *Organization Science*, 22(3), 587-601.
- Geraldi, J., & Söderlund, J. (2018). Project studies: What it is, where it is going. *International Journal of Project Management*, 36(1), 55-70.
- Grant, A. M., & Berry, J. W. (2011). The necessity of others is the mother of invention: Intrinsic and prosocial motivations, perspective taking, and creativity. *Academy of Management Journal*, 54(1), 73-96.
- Holland, D., Lachicotte, W., Skinner, D., & Cain, C. (1998). *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Holland, D., & Lave, J. (2001). *History in person: Enduring struggles, contentious practice, intimate identities*: SAR Press.
- Kvalnes, Ø. (2016). Living with the unknown unknown: uncertainty in projects. *Project management journal*, 47(3), 101-108.
- Little, B. R. (1993). Personal projects and the distributed self: Aspects of a conative psychology. *The self in social perspective: Psychological perspectives on the self*, 4, 157-185.
- Little, B. R., Salmela-Aro, K., & Phillips, S. D. (2017). *Personal project pursuit: Goals, action, and human flourishing*: Psychology Press.
- Ludema, J. D., Wilmot, T. B., & Srivastva, S. (1997). Organizational hope: Reaffirming the constructive task of social and organizational inquiry. *Human Relations*, 50(8), 1015-1052.
- Lundin, R. A., Arvidsson, N., Brady, T., Ekstedt, E., Midler, C., & Sydow, J. (2015). *Managing and Working in Project Society: Institutional Challenges of Temporary Organizations*, . Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Luthans, F., & Youssef-Morgan, C. M. (2017). Psychological capital: An evidence-based positive approach. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 4, 339-366.
- MacIntyre, A. (1981). *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory*. London: Duckworth.
- Manen, M. V. (1997). From meaning to method. *Qualitative health research*, 7(3), 345-369.
- McAdams, D. P. (1993). *The stories we live by: Personal myths and the making of the self*: Guilford Press.
- McAdams, D. P. (2001). The psychology of life stories. *Review of general psychology*, 5(2), 100.
- McAdams, D. P., Diamond, A., de St Aubin, E., & Mansfield, E. (1997). Stories of commitment: The psychosocial construction of generative lives. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 72(3), 678.
- McAdams, D. P., & Guo, J. (2015). Narrating the Generative Life. *Psychological science*, 26(4), 475-483.
- Mills, C. W. (1959/2000). *The Sociological Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mitchell, W. T. (1981). *On narrative*: University of Chicago Press Journals.
- Myers, C. G. (2014). Coactive vicarious learning: Towards a relational theory of vicarious learning in organizations.
- Nilsson, W. (2015). Positive Institutional work: Exploring institutional work through the lens of positive organizational scholarship. *Academy of Management Review*, 40(3), 370-398.

- Pierce, J. L., Kostova, T., & Dirks, K. T. (2001). Toward a theory of psychological ownership in organizations. *Academy of Management Review*, 26(2), 298-310.
- Pirandello, L. (1926/1992). *One, No One & One Hundred Thousand*. New York, NY: Marsilio Publishers.
- Pitsis, T. S., Clegg, S. R., Marosszeky, M., & Rura-Polley, T. (2003). Constructing the Olympic dream: A future perfect strategy of project management. *Organization Science*, 14(5), 574-590.
- Pratt, M. G., Rockmann, K. W., & Kaufmann, J. B. (2006). Constructing professional identity: The role of work and identity learning cycles in the customization of identity among medical residents. *Academy of Management Journal*, 49(2), 235-262.
- Quinn, R. E., & Thakor, A. V. (2018). Creating a purpose-driven organization. *Harvard business review*, 96(4), 78-85.
- Ricoeur, P. (1991). Narrative identity. *Philosophy today*, 35(1), 73-81.
- Robbins, D. (2005). The origins, early development and status of Bourdieu's concept of 'cultural capital'. *The British journal of sociology*, 56(1), 13-30.
- Rosso, B. D., Dekas, K. H., & Wrzesniewski, A. (2010). On the meaning of work: A theoretical integration and review. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 30, 91-127.
- Sarbin, T. R. (1986). *Narrative psychology: The storied nature of human conduct*: Praeger Publishers/Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Schatzki, T. R. (2001). Introduction. Practice theory. In K. Knorr-Cetina, E. von Savigny, & T. R. Schatzki (Eds.), *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory* (pp. 1-14). London: Routledge.
- Scheibe, K. E. (1986). Self-narratives and adventure. In T. R. Sarbin (Ed.), *Narrative Psychology. The Storied Nature of Human Conduct*. (pp. 129-151). Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.
- Scheibe, K. E. (2000). *The drama of everyday life*: Harvard University Press.
- Schutz, A. (1967). *The phenomenology of the social world*: Northwestern University Press.
- Schutz, A., & Wagner, H. R. (1970). *On phenomenology and social relations Selected writings*. Chicago, Il: Chicago University Press.
- Sennett, R. (2008). *The craftsman*: Yale University Press.
- Stephens, J. P., Heaphy, E., & Dutton, J. E. (2012). High quality connections. In K. Cameron & G. Spreitzer (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of positive organizational scholarship* (pp. 385-399). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Svejenova, S., Strandgaard Pedersen, J., & Vives, L. (2011). Projects of passion: lessons for strategy from temporary art. In G. Cattani, S. Ferriani, L. Frederiksen, & F. Täube (Eds.), *Project-Based Organizing and Strategic Management* (pp. 501-527): Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- Taylor, S. S., Ladkin, D., & Statler, M. (2014). Caring Orientations: The Normative Foundations of the Craft of Management. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 1-10.
- Van Marrewijk, A. (2017). The multivocality of symbols: A longitudinal study of the symbolic dimensions of the high-speed train megaproject (1995–2015). *Project management journal*, 48(6), 47-59.
- Van Oorschot, K., Sengupta, K., Akkermans, H., & Van Wassenhove, L. (2010). Get fat fast: Surviving stage-gate® in NPD. *Journal of Product Innovation Management*, 27(6), 828-839.
- Välikangas, L., & Carlsen, A. (2019). Spitting in the Salad: Minor Rebellion as Institutional Agency. *Organization Studies*, 0170840619831054.

